

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

- Wednesday, July 22, 2009

UCLA Investigates Corporate Payments to a Surgeon at Its Medical School



Courtesy of UCLA Jeffrey Wang

By Paul Basken

The University of California at Los Angeles removed a chief of its spine-surgery center, Jeffrey C. Wang, while admitting to U.S. Senate investigators that it can't understand how he managed to collect more than \$450,000 in undisclosed corporate income. The university also said it did not know whether the failure to detect Dr. Wang's financial ties compromised any research or patient care.

It's unclear how "a pattern of nondisclosure could have persisted without our knowledge," the university said in a written statement provided to *The Chronicle*. "We are committed to examining our processes to determine how, as an institution, we will prevent similar problems in the future."

The announcement came as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services met to consider ways to get universities to hire more outside consultants to review that type of

research. But critics charge that such outside review boards work too quickly to provide strong oversight.

Dr. Wang is among several university scientists under investigation by Mr. Grassley, a Republican of Iowa who has been highlighting instances of financial conflicts in medical research.

Mr. Grassley publicly identified Dr. Wang in May, saying he submitted disclosure forms that repeatedly denied receiving income of \$500 or more from companies financing his clinical research. Dr. Wang was, however, paid at least \$459,500 between 2004 and 2007 by medical-device and drug companies that include Bone Biologics, FzioMed, Medtronic, and the DePuy unit of Johnson & Johnson, Mr. Grassley said.

Dr. Wang, in a June 15 letter to university officials that was provided to Mr. Grassley, disputed some of the payments attributed to him. He said some compensation consisted of stock options that he never exercised. He also said he didn't keep precise track of payments, saying "mail could sit for an extended period of time without my wife or I opening it or recording its contents."

The university, in its statement late Monday, said that it "has seen no indication of research misconduct as defined by federal regulation, only a failure by Dr. Wang to make timely reports of financial interests." A university spokeswoman, Roxanne Y. Moster, said Tuesday that Dr. Wang, an associate professor of orthopedic surgery, has been removed from his position as executive co-director of the UCLA Comprehensive Spine Center.

Mr. Grassley has been pursuing legislation in Congress that would strengthen federal requirements on researchers to declare their financial conflicts of interest, including by creating a system for comparing payment data submitted by scientists with payment data reported by companies.

Scrutiny of Review Panels

The senator is also planning an investigation into the effectiveness of institutional review boards, which are panels assigned to review and monitor scientific experiments to ensure the safety of any human subjects who may be involved. Universities often run their own institutional review boards, though some hire outside entities to perform the functions.

When asked whether Dr. Wang's failure to fully disclose outside payments from companies meant his work was not fully reviewed by an institutional review board, Dale Triber Tate, a spokeswoman for UCLA, declined to elaborate beyond the university's written statement. In it, the university said the internal investigation will study whether "potential conflicts of interest identified have in any way affected the research performed and if there are any mitigating actions needed to ensure the integrity of the research results."

UCLA issued its response as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Advisory Committee on Human Research Protections gathered Tuesday in Arlington, Va., to consider new regulations governing institutional review boards.

The department is trying to revise its oversight procedures in ways that would encourage universities to use outside institutional review boards, rather than their internal boards, said Jerry A. Menikoff, director of the department's Office for Human Research Protections.

But putting more of the regulatory burden on outside review boards, rather than the universities, might not improve overall monitoring of research, said Susan C. Chimonas, an associate research scholar at Columbia University's Center on Medicine as a Profession. That's because commercial institutional review boards "base their business, in part, by offering fast turnaround on research proposals," she said. "A better approach would be for the federal government to require greater accountability by all IRB's, external or internal."

Universities also need to pay more attention to whether they review research activities by their own staff that may damage their institutional reputations even though the work involves outside facilities, Ms. Chimonas said. The case of Dr. Wang may prove a strong incentive for UCLA to do so. Even within the same statewide system, she said, there are campuses such as the University of California at Davis that have taken a much more aggressive definition of how they monitor outside research by university faculty members.

Institutions such as UCLA could be realizing the danger of ignoring outside research work, Ms. Chimonas said. "This may be a wake-up call for a lot of institutions who have been thinking, 'Well, this has nothing to do with us,'" she said.